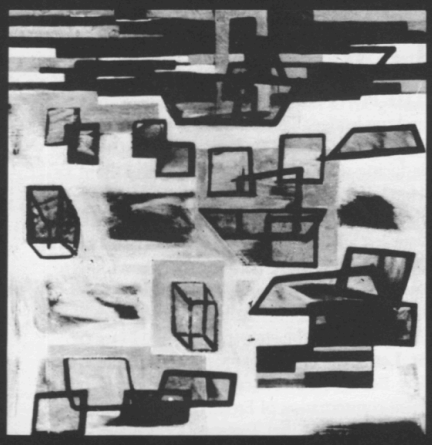
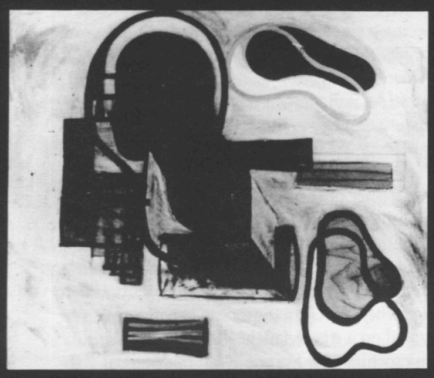
EQUATOR

OCTOBER·NOVEMBER WAY OUT WEST NO·1 TWODOLLARS

DAVID BYRNE'S TRUE CONFESSIONS · BOSSES OF BEBOP · COOL HAND LUKE
SUSAN SEIDELMAN · NEW FICTION · MARTIN AMIS STORMS AMERICA

DAVID BYRNE





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THERESA HACKETT TOP: *Water Street Boogie Wig.* 1986
BOTTOM: *The Migration of the Containers Into the Swimming Pool.* 1986

DAVID BYRNE ON

DAVID BYRNE

MARK LIPSON

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERTA SMOODIN/I AM SITTING IN AN ITALIAN RESTAURANT IN SAN FRANCISCO, SIPPING WINE, FEELING ANXIOUS, WHEN DAVID BYRNE WALKS IN — EYES WIDE, SHORT SHIRTSLEEVES FLAPPING, NIKON SLUNG OVER ONE SHOULDER — AND JOINS ME. OF COURSE, THIS IS WHAT'S SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN. I'VE TRACKED HIM DOWN, MADE IT PAST THE PHALANX OF PUBLICISTS AND PROTECTORS, AND NOW I'VE GOT THREE DAYS TO INTERVIEW THE SMARTEST AND MOST NERVOUS MAN IN ROCK AND ROLL.

THE SUMMER'S ALMOST OVER, AND BYRNE IS RACING TO WRAP UP *TRUE STORIES*, A PROJECT HE'S BEEN WORKING ON STEADILY FOR THE LAST TWO YEARS (WRITING, ACTING, DIRECTING, EDITING). *TRUE STORIES* IS BYRNE'S FIRST SOLO

I think everybody has the creative impulse, but what's people might be interested in what you have to say, or

DAVID BYRNE

AMY ETRA

TRUE STORIES STARTED OUT, SAYS DAVID BYRNE, "NOT AS ONE STORY OR SCRIPT, BUT WITH A LOT OF STORIES FOUND IN VARIOUS NEWSPAPER ARTICLES, ALONG WITH SOME DRAMATIC VISUAL IDEAS REPRESENTED BY DRAWINGS I MADE."

flight into filmmaking. It's also the most ambitious undertaking of his career, a career that includes a dozen albums and seven videos, a conceptual role in Jonathan Demme's Talking Heads concert film, *Stop Making Sense*, as well as collaborations with composer Brian Eno, choreographer Twyla Tharp and theater director Robert Wilson.

Byrne's earliest work with Talking Heads was characterized by a pervasive and disconcerting anxiety. Now one might be tempted to say he's, well, *mellowed*. *True Stories* finds Byrne, the archetypal neurotic New Yorker, seeking to portray a gently droll vision of life in a small Texas town. "In *True Stories* I stay away from loaded subjects — sex, violence, and political intrigue — because as soon as you get on those subjects, everybody already has preconceived ideas about them," he notes in a new book about the film. "I deal with stuff that's too dumb for people to have bothered to formulate opinions on."

When I come face-to-face with him, however, I discover that the word mellow is a mistake. He scans the room like a high-speed video camera in a bank lobby. When we're seated for dinner, he points his Nikon, carefully angled on the table, at an All-American, hand-holding couple nearby and surreptitiously clicks some photos. "I used a red lens," he says excitedly. "I like everything to look like the Madonna Inn."

He lights the first of quite a few Carltons and talks, animatedly, about the hazards of Texas weather. "Two feet of hail fell on a bowling alley in Texas yesterday," he says, "and the roof caved in." Then he laughs, his head thrown back like a coyote's.

That laugh breaks through many times as Byrne talks about his Hollywood experience, describing the "pathetic little pitch" he took around to movie studios and the circuitous route he had to follow to get *True Stories* made. "It was too strange for Hollywood," he recalls. "I knew that from the start. It was an excuse to meet these people, anyway. Even though I knew they would never take a chance on it." He wolfs his food, samples mine by reaching with his fork onto my plate, drinks his daily allotment of espresso (Byrne's rule: no caffeine after 10 pm).

"When it [the film] started out," he continues, "it seemed like it was a kind of mood piece, with occasional comic touches. Now there's a kind of wry humor in it that's more consistent than I originally imagined. I guess that's just something that happens in the editing. That was kind of nice — it revealed itself to be what it is. The footage kind of tells you what it's going to be, and you just have to make it that."

He pauses for a long Byrne-think, a pause that in someone else might indicate extreme boredom or irritation. If you can stand to sit still and wait for him to scan the contents of his mind without biting your fingernails or leaping in with a new question that will force him to change speeds and directions, he will explain exactly what he's thinking. "I thought it was funny," he concludes. "I didn't always realize that other people would think it was funny too."

TO GET A SENSE OF HOW BYRNE WORKS, I spend a day at Russian Hill Recording, the studio where Byrne has been holed up for much of the summer mixing and editing the sound for the film. What I see is how Byrne has arranged his life to avoid any possible contact with boredom. He does everything at once. He answers phones upstairs, records musicians downstairs, runs back and forth among the small offices, eating

lacking is the audaciousness to assume that other what you have to create. It's a big assumption.

mini-Hersheys and smoking cigarettes, always in motion. When Byrne is upstairs, the violinist downstairs points at an electric keyboard. Certain keys have been annotated with red tape. "See that tape?" the violinist asks. "That's to tell David what to play. He doesn't read a note of music."

This is Byrne's show, which seems to be the way he likes to work. He plays ringmaster for all his latest undertakings. These include the book, recently released by Viking/Penguin, and *two* albums of movie music, one of which features Talking Heads. He exhibits a near-mania for detail, and he acts like he's having fun.

By eight that evening, however, after more than ten hours of work, he is finally beginning to look a little frazzled, ready to quit. We walk down the street, looking for a quiet place to have a drink. Byrne walks quickly down the sidewalk and develops an insularity, a self-absorption, that makes conversation impossible. I have trouble keeping up with him.

At the bar, he's more silent than usual, smokes his inevitable Carlton, waits for questions. Tired, he has a slight air of exasperation.

"What does it feel like to be part of an avant-garde?" I ask. Byrne pauses, long enough for anyone else to smoke a cigarette, before answering. "I guess people wonder nowadays whether that exists anymore. I think it's supposed to mean what recently people used to term underground art, or underground film, or underground music. Art that would have a small audience, but that would be innovative. The ideas would be assimilated and used by popular art soon after, within ten years, or 20 years." Another long pause. "Well, I don't know." He's irritated at this point, edgy. "I feel like I'm doing what's current. Anything that's not is kind of behind the times. If you're really doing things that are way ahead of your time, hardly anybody would like it. I'm aware that a certain number of people like what I do. So I feel like, when it works, I'm expressing something that's current, that other people are feeling as well."

"You don't seem to like the term avant-garde," I suggest. Now he's really exasperated. "I just never think about it."

"It's been suggested that you have a terrible fear of the everyday," I say, pushing onward.

Byrne shoots me a look, then glances sideways before answering. His discomfort is stylized and palpable, mini-drama. "No, I kind of disagree," he says. "It's a love/hate relationship." Surprisingly, he laughs, and the tension dissipates.

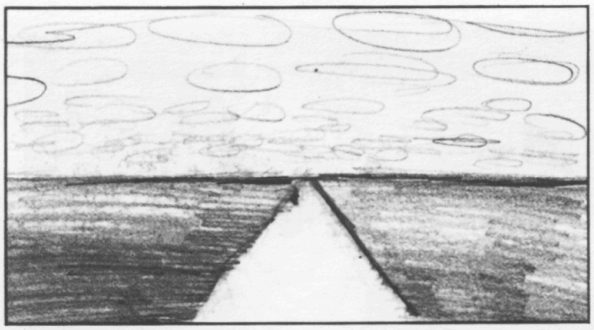
AT BYRNE'S SUGGESTION, I leave my tape recorder and a list of questions with him, allowing him to respond as he goes about his business at the studio. This approach makes sense. He's shy, and his wariness and evasiveness with an interviewer obfuscates authentic Byrne-ness instead of revealing it. Addressing himself to a tape recorder, he's able to remove the uncertainty of human interaction. His wry, concise, deadpan delivery is perfected. The transcript that follows, then, may be the truest kind of Byrne document of all.

THE FIRST QUESTION IS, are shy people more intelligent. I don't know about that. I know that there were girls in high school who were real quiet, and you had no idea what they

MARK LIPSON

ROEBUCK "POPS" STAPLES PLAYS MR. TUCKER, A *CURANDERO* WITH THE POWER TO HEAL THE LOVELORN. "YOU SEE," TUCKER EXPLAINS, "WE ALL LIVE IN A GIGANTIC MAGNETIC FIELD.... DON'T LET NEGATIVE THOUGHTS ENTER YOUR MIND. HAVE FAITH — BELIEVE — IT'LL ALL BE RIGHT."

In True Stories *I stay away from loaded subjects — as you get on those subjects, everybody already has too dumb for people to have bothered to formulate*



DAVID BYRNE

HERE BYRNE'S STORYBOARDS BEAR A CLOSE RESEMBLANCE TO WHAT BECAME THE FILM'S OPENING SEQUENCE: A LITTLE GIRL, A DESERTED ROAD AND A FLAT TEXAS LANDSCAPE. "THIS IS WHERE THE TOWN BEGINS," SAYS BYRNE AS *TRUE STORIES* NARRATOR. "THIS PART OF THE COUNTRY HAS BEEN THROUGH LOTS OF CHANGES... AND NOT ALL SMALL ONES EITHER. I THINK THEY'RE IN THE PROCESS OF GOING THROUGH ANOTHER ONE."

did with themselves. And later on, they turned out to be much hipper than a lot of the other people who were more outgoing during high school.

The second question is, you ask about using fictional personas as voices in the songs. That's because I think I can identify with a lot of other people. One's personality is made up of varying percentages of all the various possible personalities, male and female. So it's pretty easy if you want to, to just delve into and explore one of those a little bit. Plus I feel like I don't have much to say. These other people do. They really have strong opinions about things.

The next question is about ephemeral art. Yeah, I like art that doesn't last long enough to be considered precious or to be sold as commodities. That's something I have in common with the late '60s and early '70s, and I haven't quite given it up. I've found that there are other creative forms that share that sensibility. Eastern theater. Food styling. Gossip. Manners. Those are just a few creative activities that don't have any lasting material aspect.

The next question is, what do you like about wearing hats. I like them because then you don't have to worry about what your hairdo makes your head shape look like. Sometimes your hairdo, when photographed or when seen from a particular angle, makes it look like you have an odd head shape. You can disguise this by wearing a hat.

[This next question referred to a line from the screenplay for *True Stories*: "Only by forgetting can I remember what a place is really like ... so maybe for me forgetting and remembering are the same thing."] Forgetting and remembering. Well, maybe they're not exactly the same thing. But, I guess another way to say it would be that forgetting is a way to re-experience something. A way of getting in touch with how your senses perceive it. At least that's what I think.

The next question is, do you remember your dreams. Odd you should ask. No. I remember maybe a couple a year. Those, because they're the only ones I remember, I think they must be of some importance. They're probably no more important than any of the others, but it's really fun to remember them. Most of the ones I remember are entertaining ones. At least to me, they don't seem to imply any (laughter) great anxieties or problems.

The next question is, there seems to be an important element of joy and transcendence in your music. You seem to be in an altered state. Yeah, in, I think, a lot of performance, especially when there's a rhythm, you're kind of lifted, and put more in touch with some sort of collective sensibility that exists somewhere among musicians and the audience. It's also a kind of surrender, it's surrendering a little bit of one's own ego to that of the group. And it's a nice feeling. It's the antithesis to much of what we're brought up to think of as desirable. We're for the most part taught that it's desirable to make decisions and follow one's own will and stay in control as much as possible, except maybe during sex. But that's a bias we have that makes us miss a great experience.

Why are you interested in naive art? I'm interested in it because it seems — some of it anyway — both pure, in that, the things that I'm interested in anyway, were not created with a marketplace in mind. They weren't created even with an audience in mind. I also find some of this kind of art, which

PHOTOS FROM *TRUE STORIES* BY DAVID BYRNE, REPRINTED BY ARRANGEMENT WITH VIKING PENGUIN, INC. © 1986 TRUE STORIES VENTURES, INC.

sex, violence and political intrigue — because as soon preconceived ideas about them. I deal with stuff that's opinions on.

has also been called outsider art or *art fou*, interesting because it sometimes connects with some sort of basic or group unconscious or subsconscious. It has elements in common with some modern art that way. Except in modern art, sometimes the execution is a lot more refined. Some of that kind of rawness has been smoothed out. The patterns and shapes and connections between things are quite moving for the reason that you know that the person doing it is not trying to trick you.

The next question is about election leafletting. Yeah, I did two posters during the last election. One was the official portrait of Reagan with the word "actor" printed above it in Republican blue. Then there was another one that just had two images, one of the devastation at Hiroshima and below it a field of flowers, and in the middle the word "choice." I didn't put my name on them because the idea of posters like that is not to talk to people who share your views. I wanted them to look official, and not like the work of some underground leftists. I thought if my name was on them, people might be biased. They might not take them as seriously.

The next question is, do you feel alienated from the mainstream of American culture, even as you are fascinated by popular culture. No, I think it's impossible for me to be alienated from American culture, because I am part of American culture, which is what I always wanted, not necessarily American culture, but to be part of the sea I swim in.

The next question is, where does the creative impulse come from? Anger? Alienation? Happiness? Well, I don't know. I can't answer that. I know a couple of things. I find it difficult to write when I'm very sad or very angry. Although later on, when I feel okay, then it's possible to re-imagine those moods and write about them, about being angry, or about being sad, or whatever. You have to feel happy and confident to write about being sad. I think everybody has the creative impulse, but what's lacking is the audaciousness to assume that other people might be interested in what you have to say, or what you have to create. It's a big assumption.

Next quesion is about working in both the visual and audial arts. To me, the creative process in these different areas is always the same. The refining, the craftsmanship, the technical and craft-type skills that go into each one are different. They need to be learned.

Then there's this other question — is there a movie, complete with soundtrack, in your head? Not complete. Occasionally there's bits, scenes, and moments. I can catch glimpses of something. But I can't imagine them all together.

Can movie-making and music-making be integrated into your life without driving you crazy? Well, I guess so. I'm less crazy now than I was before. I work a lot. Sometimes it's work, and sometimes I really enjoy it. The opportunity's there, and I feel I should take advantage of it as much as I can. Until the well runs dry, I should be doing whatever I can, with whatever possibilities are available.

Here's the last question. What do you do to relax? Travel. Watch movies. Eat. Drink. Walk around and look in windows. Look at picture books. I don't need to relax too much, because I enjoy my work. It's not something I have to escape from.

That's about all for now. ⊖

ED LACHMAN

AMY ETRA

TOP: A WINDBLOWN BYRNE ON THE *TRUE STORIES* SET

BOTTOM: TALKING HEADS (L-R, TINA WEYMOUTH, BYRNE, JERRY HARRISON AND CHRIS FRANTZ)